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SEPARATION-INDIVIDUATION PROCESSES IN ADULTHOOD

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Abstract. *The concept of separation-individuation is one of the most influential paradigms that sprang from psychoanalytic theory. The process of separation-individuation takes place during one's lifetime and significantly influences every phase of development in the life-long cycle. Even though this process is determined by previous experience in adulthood, it is not a copy of childhood experiences. This paper elaborates on some of the following midlife developmental tasks which influence separation-individuation processes: 1) accepting the aging process in the body; 2) coming to terms with time limitation and personal death; 3) maintaining intimacy; 4) transforming one's relationship with grown-up children by letting them go and establishing a relationship with new family members; 5) becoming a grandparent; 6) caring for aging and dying parents; 7) exercising and relinquishing power in the workplace; and 8) building and maintaining friendships.*

Key words: *adulthood, separation-individuation processes.*

“The entire course of life can be observed as a more or less successful process of separation from the lost introjective symbiotic mother, an eternal craving for a real or fantasied ‘ideal self’, where the latter represents the symbiotic fusion with a “completely good” mother who was, at one point, a part of ‘the self’ during the period of a state of bliss”.

Mahler 1974, 305

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1. INTRODUCTION

The theory of separation-individuation by Margaret Mahler (1974) is very significant for the understanding of a psychodynamic approach to adulthood. One of the basic assumptions of this approach, in which the concept of development is understood as a life-long process, is that the key developmental problems in childhood, as well as in adolescence, remain central aspects in adulthood as well, albeit in a different form. Among the basic processes through which the developmental tasks of the entire life-cycle are observed, there is also the process of separation-individuation.

Mahler (1974) defines separation-individuation as a process during which the newborn, starting from a relatively undifferentiated psychological state immediately after birth, and its symbiotic connection with the mother, gradually, until the age of three, builds a separate, personal identity. Namely, during the phase of separation-individuation there occur two interdependent changes: separating oneself from others (separation) and forming one's own identity (individuation).

Mahler (as cited in Winestine 1973) also argued that separation-individuation is a process which operates throughout one's lifetime and plays an important role in each of the stages of development. Since, in "each new step towards independence", there is a threat (fear) of object loss. An absolute dependency on the mother which is characteristic for the period of infancy, throughout the course of life becomes a relative dependency. Spiegel (as cited in Marcus 1973) states that in adults as well, the independency from objects can only be partially achieved. It also represents an important trait of maturity, but it cannot be considered equal to it.

Although the authors representing the psychodynamic approach to adulthood (Colarusso 1997; Madow 1997; Ross 1994; Settlege 1988) agree with Mahler that the early mother/child dyad is the basis onto which all other relations are built later on, it cannot be used on its own to explain the phenomenon of separation-individuation in this period of life. Unlike the process which operates during the first three years of life – absolute or relative dependency on the mother, distancing and introjection of the representation of the mother – the goal of separation-individuation in adulthood is that the object should be recognised as itself without any reference to 'the self', that is, that 'the self' and 'the object' are recognised as independent. The question of closeness and distance of adults has to be observed within the context of primary relations which are significant for this stage of life: relations with a spouse, aging parents, children and grandchildren, colleagues at work and friends. The emotional and developmental tasks with which adults are faced (sexuality, generativity, work, etc.) shape these relations in a specific way. A physically and sexually mature body and a much more developed psychological structure during this stage of life imply qualitatively different relations from those which shape the interaction between the mother and child. Therefore, for example, in these relations, the response to the changes in the field of sexuality will not only depend on the occurrences related to pregenital phases, although these are very important, but also on the level of integration of sexual identity, on the experience of an adult in intimate relationships, as well as on the place it occupies in one's life.

Colarusso (2000) points out that the basic difference between separation-individuation in childhood, and in adulthood, is the level of intrapsychic experience in the separation from the aspects of 'the self'. During childhood and youth, during the first (Mahler 1974)

and the second individuation (Blos 1967), a physical presence of infantile objects is essential for these processes and functioning throughout the entire course of life. In children, separation causes anxiety due to their limited ability to maintain for a long time the mental representation of a loved object while that object is absent. With time (and with the development of the cognitive apparatus), mental representations of objects become more lasting, which enables a certain level of differentiation of the representation of 'the self' from the representation of the loved object, and the possibility of separation leads to the further process of individuation and the belief of a child that it is independent, separated from the mother. Mahler et al. (1975) describe these changes as the primary separation which enables the "psychological birth of the baby" and, until the age of three, the development of the capacity for the constancy of 'the self' and the object, which represent the foundation of all future relations. The self and the idea of objects and their mental representations continue to be modified during adolescence, marriage, parenthood, one's professional career, climacteric, retirement, aging, due to the physical aging and the acceptance of time limitation of the future and personal death.

2. FACTORS OF SEPARATION-INDIVIDUATION IN MIDDLE ADULTHOOD

2.1. The acceptance of the aging process in the body

The changes in the physical appearance and the decline of bodily functions in adulthood as a normative, universal experience have a powerful, and sometimes dominant influence on the psychological life in this stage of development. Physical changes on the body, the decline of bodily capabilities and functions, and vulnerable health, can trigger numerous conscious and unconscious fantasies and anxieties regarding one's body. Intrapsychic separation from the physical appearance in the earlier stages of development can be experienced as a narcissistic wound due to high investments of the body. A conflict between the desire to deny the process of aging and the acceptance of the loss of the body we had during our youth is to a great extent experienced as a separation-individuation phenomenon (Colarusso and Nemiroff 1981).

The ways in which these conflicts are solved depend on numerous factors and they are more or less efficient in enabling the developmental potential and the further process of individuation. In modern society, the ways which, even for a brief time, help an individual to deal with the wound caused by the loss of a youthful body can be seen in the increased use of the so-called magic reparation of one's body image through surgical interventions or through the need for intimate relationships with younger or much younger individuals.

Let us focus on the role of transitional objects which are also used in resolving the conflicts related to bodily changes in mid-adulthood and their specificity in relation to the periods of childhood and adolescence.

During the first individuation, transitional objects (Winnicott 1971) help the child acquire a certain independence from external objects and to achieve object-constancy and self-constancy. In the second individuation, during the process of detachment from primary objects of love and hate, transitional objects, such as clothes, music or cars, have

a similar but qualitatively different function. During the third individuation (Colarusso 1997)^{1*} which refers to the period between the ages of 20 and 40, these kinds of objects are still used as tools in achieving autonomy, especially if they are acquired at work. The need for transitional objects during the third individuation is less intense because there are new, developmentally specific objects such as a spouse and children.

During the fourth individuation (Colarusso, 1997), the ages of 40 to 60 years, transitional objects can be significant again and can have the role of a narcissistic substitute for the lost youthful body. As symbolic substitutes for the young body, it is not rare for an individual to use the so-called “toys for adults” such as big and better cars, houses, computers... These attempts to deny aging and to achieve fusion with the body from youth are often unsuccessful, and sometimes pathological. In order to create an adequate response to the developmental task which refers to bodily changes, an individual in mid-adulthood has to go through the process of grieving, to deal with the loss, to gradually adjust his/her body image with reality and, in that way, create the possibility of achieving developmental potential and the further process of individuation.

2.2. Recognition and coming to terms with time limitation and the inevitability of personal death

Faced with the physical signs of aging which are more and more frequent and prominent, with children who are now adults, and not rarely with the death of parents and the arrival of grandchildren, individuals in mid-adulthood struggle with the acceptance of the painful, but inevitable, realisation that the future is limited and death is certain. The increased awareness of time limitation which has remained is an extremely powerful psychological organiser which significantly influences all aspects of the process of development in adults, which, in turn, determines the quality of separation-individuation processes (Colarusso and Nemiroff 1981).

Unlike the late adolescence which is characterised by the physical and psychological separation from infantile objects, the establishment of new relations, where particular importance is given to close and intimate relations of sexual nature, as well as the need to extend one's own personality through offspring, in mid-adulthood there is an awareness and a strong focus on loss. At the very moment when one's life is filled with numerous relationships (with a partner, children, grandchildren, aging parents and friends), there is also a threat of an approaching possibility that all these relations will be lost.

The fundamental difference between separation-individuation in childhood and in adulthood is the level of intrapsychic experience of separation and individuation. The self and the object of a representation and their mental representations from the period of infancy continue to be modified during adolescence and all essential “affectively guided functions” (Steinschein 1973), such as marriage, parenthood, work, retirement, as well as

¹Relying on the previously stated assumptions regarding the development in adulthood and with the use of already acknowledged terms '*first and second individuation*', which were suggested by Mahler and Blos, and which refer to childhood and adolescence, Colarusso (2000), one of the most significant authors from the 1990s dealing with the psychodynamic approach to adulthood, introduced the concepts of third, fourth and fifth individuation in order to show the aspects of normative separation-individuation processes in adults.

physical aging and coming to terms with time limitation of the future and personal death. Also, there is a continuous separation from the aspects of 'the self' which have been formed earlier. When an individual enters a marriage, he/she is no longer a single person; a middle-aged mentor is no longer a young student...

Middle adulthood activates, it could be said, a final parting from self-representations which have never been accomplished. An individual realises that he/she does not have any more time to become all that he/she could have been, and that many expectations will not be fulfilled (Erikson 1963; as cited in Erikson 2008). Levinson (1978) picturesquely indicates this characteristic of middle age by naming it "the period of the loss of illusions."

However, as it has been pointed out by Auchincloss and Michels (1989), "the loss of illusions" can also be the encouragement for further development. A careful and conscious reexamination of life goals, as claimed by these authors, is one of the most significant psychological tasks of middle age. Ideals and ambitions which are formed under the influence of children's fantasies have to be viewed within the context of the actual reality. Modell (1989) also argues that one of the prerequisites of the constancy of psychic life is grieving for lost illusions. The process of grieving for unfulfilled goals and ambitions leads to the reorganisation of the ego ideal and the focus on those goals which can be achieved. This painful process of grieving for these and many other losses can lead to different pathological manifestations, but also to a most complete realisation of one's capacities and a high level of individuation. Pollock (1979) stresses the role of the process of grieving in further development and individuation. Grieving is a universal transformational process which allows for reality to be accepted the way it is – including losses and changes. A successful end of grieving is equal to healing and it leads to further development and a higher level of satisfaction with life. As it is said by the novelist and existential psychiatrist Irvin D. Yalom (Yalom 2011, 24), "although the physicality of death destroys us, the idea of death saves us."

The threat of the loss of an object is present throughout the entire life cycle. During childhood, adolescence and adulthood, losses of one's dear and significant persons can occur, due to death, divorce, ending of an emotional relationship or friendship, and losing a job. "However, in middle and mature ages there is a powerful intrapsychic transformation from a person who is being abandoned to the one who is abandoning, when we are struggling with the universal developmental tasks of coming to terms with time limitation and personal death" (Colarusso 2000, 1474). Besides this, the attitude towards abandoning, that is, dying, before the start of mid-adulthood is not an inevitable, normative, universal experience of abandoning "everything and everyone."

Surely, separation from others, and the world in general, will depend on the experiences from the first individuation, on later experiences when an individual abandons and is being abandoned, but also on religious and intellectual beliefs (Madow 1997; Settlege 1988). Regarding the relationship between religious beliefs and the fear of death, Rosik (1989) states that individuals who express the highest level of fear of death are neither atheists nor agnostics, but are those who go to church occasionally and who are not consistent in their beliefs and behaviours.

2.3. Separation-individuation processes in marriage

One of the most significant factors of separation-individuation processes in adulthood is marriage. What are the foundations of these processes in marital relations?

The relation between partners, besides the current reality and the experiences in intimate relations, is also greatly determined by primary personal experiences with their parents, mostly the mother from the symbiotic and the separation-individuation subphases. The relations in the primary family produce, among other things, the inner world of expectations, conscious and unconscious, as well as those which concern the attitude towards other people, and also towards one's partner. Certainly, the relation between partners is only partly formed by internal objects created by introjection or a fantasised mental incorporation of a parent or his/her parts. The mature, balanced marital relation requires that partners become more and more differentiated from the world of internal objects and relations with them in order to be able to invest themselves in a new relation (Kondić and Vidanović 2011). Considering that the dynamics of marriage is a very broad and complex topic, we will focus on the analysis of the influence of aggrandised infantile representations and the optimum distance in the relations between spouses.

In order to understand the separation-individuation processes in marriage, Nemiroff and Colarusso (1981) rely on Kohut's concept of the aggrandised 'self' and the constancy of separation and individuation during one's lifelong development. As shown by Blos (1967), the construct of the idealised object develops until the end of adolescence as a result of secondary individuation processes. Its formation enables certain infantile narcissistic investments of mental representations of parents to be transferred onto the idealised representations of significant people, most often in adulthood, onto a marital partner. After two individuals start living together, in time, they experience a painful confrontation with the reality which inevitably disrupts the idealised representation of the partner. Being that the realistic representation of the partner never reaches the idealised one, the reactivation of experiences from early separation-individuation processes occurs. Separation from the aggrandised infantile representations, as painful as it is, is, at the same time, the precondition of mature love. Kernberg (1984) also argued that the idealisation of the object of love is a normal, integral part of an intimate attachment, but also, that an exaggerated and unrealistic idealisation interferes with the establishment of an intimate relationship because intimacy requires a realistic perception of another individual.

Regarding the inner capacity for marriage, Colman (1993) emphasises that the capability of intimacy implies differentiation and distance. In order to establish an intimate relationship, it is necessary to achieve an optimum distance between 'the self' and the internalised object. More specifically, the experience from separation-individuation processes, the establishment of safe boundaries between 'the self' and the object, and the formation of the independent 'self' and the identity are crucial for the development of the optimum distance, and consequently, the capacity for intimacy. Therefore, the optimum distance is the condition for intimacy without the loss of autonomy and separation without painful loneliness (Akhtar 1992).

It is argued that (for example, Feldman et al. 1998) intimacy and the capacity to establish and maintain marital relations are crucial for the adaptability of adults. Although

many studies (Scharf and Mayseless 2001; Hoffman 1984) have investigated different factors of intimacy, most of them are focused on its connection with separation-individuation processes in adolescence and early adulthood. A newer longitudinal study (Beyers and Seiffge-Krenke 2010) analysed whether one's identity (determined according to Erikson's theory) is the predictor of intimacy in adolescence and early adulthood. It has been shown that during a ten-year period there has been progress in the development of identity and intimacy, and that the development of intimacy followed the development of identity.

In chronic marital problems, there are difficulties in maintaining an intimate dyad relation. They are characterised by oscillations between intimacy and distance, trust and distrust... Relying on the separation-individuation theory by Mahler, Sheila Sharpe (1991) described three marital pathologies: symbiotic, oppositional and cooperative. In addition, the author argued that in dysfunctional marital relations, separation-individuation processes did not reoccur in a form identical to the one which had occurred in the first three years of life; however, they were essentially the "recapitulation" in the context of adulthood.

2.4. Separation-individuation processes in relations toward children

The already started reorganisation of close relationships, which occurs when one enters adulthood, continues with the arrival of children. Parenthood requires certain changes in already existing close relationships with one's parents, partner and friends. Namely, from early adulthood, parents are expected to rearrange and redirect all their previous investments towards children, which, consequently, leads to the redefining of the 'self' of both parents. Certainly, fatherhood and motherhood are complementary processes which are carried out within certain family dynamics and a certain social/cultural context. The father and the mother carry with them their personal experiences of growing up, which inevitably influence family dynamics, individual development, as well as marital and parental relations.

However, in middle and late adulthood, the developmental imperative is the separation between parents and children. And, at the same time, due to the changes which occur in these periods of life, there is a strong need for fusion with one's descendants who represent genetic immortality and a mechanism of denial of aging, loss and death. After early adulthood, as argued by Yalom, another powerful eruption of the fear of death occurs....

"Because we cannot live frozen in fear, we generate methods to soften death's terror. We project ourselves into the future through our children; we grow rich, famous, ever larger; we develop compulsive protective rituals; or we embrace an impregnable belief in an ultimate rescuer" (Yalom 2011, 22).

Although the aspects of symbiosis can be seen during the second and the third individuations, separation from the previous parental role is essential in middle adulthood. Together with the developmental transformation from the role of the parent of a dependent child, during this period of life, an individual faces new challenges and the emergency for further individuation while there is still time.

Certainly, the attitude of parents towards separation from their children is not simple at all. The acceptance of independence of children by their parents is strongly influenced by their relationship with their own parents, previously, and now, when their parents are old. It is particularly important to point out that the process of separation between parents and children influences both generations. Unfortunately, besides the unquestionable importance of this interactive, the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the parent and the child, the attention of theoreticians, as well as researchers, is mostly directed towards the role of the parent and parenthood in the development of children, while the influence of a transition towards parenthood and parenthood itself on the development of adults is not given enough attention (Antonucci & Mikus 1988; Colarusso, 2000).

Naturally, the mother and the father experience separation from their children in a specific way. Also, this process depends not only on the gender of the parent, but also on the gender of the child. Researches (Seiffge-Krenke et al. 2010; Silverberg & Steingberg, as cited in Cooney 1997; Ryff et al. 1994) have also shown that there is a significant correlation between the development of the parent in mid-adulthood and the level of independence of their children, and that it depends on the gender of the parent as well as on the gender of the children.

When it comes to mothers, the autonomy and independence of an adult daughter can be the encouragement for the further development and individuation of the mother, but it can also reactivate abandoned dreams from youth and early adulthood, and intensify the pain and grieving for unfulfilled desires and missed opportunities. On the other hand, the ability of the mother to change her relationship with her newly adult son will essentially depend on the way in which the mother accepts her son's independence and his chosen one, i.e. girlfriend or wife (Colarusso 2000).

The relationship between the father and, his, now already adult children, is also determined by different factors. The role of the father in the second and the third individuations of children is quantitatively and qualitatively different from the one in the first individuation. When it comes to the fathers' reactions to the growing up of their daughters, they are essentially explained within the context of Oedipal problematic filled with rivalry with her boyfriends, and later her husband as well. If the father is able to deal with the narcissistic wound which stems from his dislocation from the position he has had in his daughter's life, the previous rivalry can be turned into friendship, and, more importantly, into a "connection" with his grandchildren. However, if he fails to do this and gets estranged, he can jeopardise or lose two relations which, not rarely, still remain essential for high quality of life in old age. The need of an adolescent son for autonomy and independence gradually changes the role of the father. The role of the protector is transformed into the role which is neither necessary nor powerful. In the following developmental phases as well, the father most often continues to feel more and more passive, powerless and helpless in relation to his son. In mid-adulthood, this position of the father can be additionally intensified when the son is in the process of choosing a partner, because that also confirms his sexual power. The struggle with this normative conflict can also be the encouragement to achieve developmental tasks of adulthood, such as generativity, and, later, the role of a grandfather (Colarusso 1997). Research (see: Lopez & Watkins 1992) also shows that the relationship of daughters, as well as sons, with their fathers significantly determines the models of the identities of children in late adolescence.

Surely, the reactions of parents to the separation from children should be viewed within the context of the changes which have been brought about by modern society, and primarily, those which refer to gender roles and family life. New generations of women are more and more prone to building their identity through their parental role, as well as their occupational role. However, despite these changes, it is still believed that the primary role of a woman is to take care of the children (Lamb & Oppenheim 1989; Anđelković & Budić 2013). When a mother centres her life on her children, and views the meaning and the purpose of her life mainly through the role of a mother, she can experience the separation from her children as an intense loss, and even as the end of her life.

The new age also shapes the role of the father. In order to indicate one of the important changes in the fatherhood of today, Miller (2010), for example, uses the phrase 'new fatherhood' which implies the increased participation of the father in the upbringing and the education of children, and also the significance of the father-child relationship for the formation of the father's identity.

2.5. The age of grandparenthood – new relations in middle and late adulthood

During middle adulthood, with the leaving of children who have grown up and the parents who are becoming old and sometimes die, there also comes a very important, new object relationship with the arrival of a grandchild.

The process of separation-individuation in lifelong development is also under the influence of relations which are established between grandchildren and grandparents. How does the arrival of grandchildren determine separation-individuation processes? What changes at different levels of the family system are brought about by grandchildren? Which developmental tasks of late adulthood are contributed to by the investment into grandchildren? These are some of the questions for which we will try to provide answers.

In his paper regarding the third individuation, in the section "Intimations of the Fourth Individuation," Colarusso (1990) points out that:

"When their child becomes a parent, new grandparents must define their standing among the generations, alter their internal representations of their "child", and develop new object ties to the grandchild. Because they are struggling with the middle- and late-life developmental tasks of dealing with retirement, illness, deaths of friends or spouse, and other experiences attending normal aging, new grandparents are developmentally primed to turn their attention toward children and grandchildren, objects who represent their (genetic) future, a future which will endure even after death, the final separation" (Colarusso 1990, 193–94).

Cath (1989) argues that the arrival of a grandchild activates certain aspects of the first individuation. What are the similarities between the relations of grandparents and grandchildren and the relation of the mother and a child? Colarusso (2000) explains that the need for fusion with grandchildren, as well as their idealisation, the same as in the mother-child relationship during the bonding phase, are in the function of achieving specific developmental tasks for each period of development. For the child, this represents the preparation for the "increasingly expanding world", and for the grandparents - the realisation of an approaching threat and possibility that this world will

be lost. This symbiosis activates and recalls, consciously and unconsciously, the earliest experiences of grandparents from their first individuation, as well as those from their own parenthood days during the third individuation. Investing in grandchildren and idealising them are one of the ways to compensate for previous losses of important persons and unfulfilled goals and ambitions. Certainly, besides the narcissistic protection from the traumas of aging and approaching death, the establishment and intensification of these new relations can very strongly enrich middle and late adulthood.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As any other phase of the life cycle, middle adulthood is also a dynamic developmental period which brings significant changes at the physical and psychological levels. Basic, universal developmental themes in this period of life such as physical signs of aging, time limitation and personal death, partnership relations, as well as relations with children and grandchildren, have been studied within the context of separation-individuation processes. Surely, these processes can also be used for understanding a very important and complex area of adult life which refers to work. As it is known, work and occupation, relations and time rhythm, define an individual and represent a significant aspect of the adults' identity. Most certainly, retirement and separation from work and the workplace also continue to shape the ongoing process of individuation.

Starting from the fact that development is a lifelong process, developmental psychoanalysts single out separation-individuation as one of the basic developmental problems stemming not only from childhood but also adulthood, albeit in changed form. Certainly, "newer" experiences are significantly correlated to events from childhood, but they cannot be completely explained through them. Naturally, the developmentally-oriented psychoanalytical psychotherapy uses a specific way to view problems which refer to dealing with separation, losses, grieving and the ways of overcoming them. As in any developmental phase, in adulthood as well, there are certain losses that lead to regression into earlier developmental stages, but at the same time contribute to progress and achievement.

It is our opinion that the theory of separation-individuation is particularly suitable for the understanding of development in adulthood because it provides an opportunity to analyse constant efforts of an individual to maintain the established relations with himself/herself and significant others, while, at the same time, he/she recognises the time-limited nature of all relations between people. The references to these and other developmental challenges and tasks of adulthood are, as we can freely say, very scarce; therefore, that leaves plenty of room for further theoretical observations and research.

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SEPARACIONO-INDIVIDUACIONI PROCESI U ODRASLOM DOBU

Koncept separacije-individuacije jedna je od najuticajnijih paradigmi koja je proizašla iz psihoanalitičke teorije. Separacija-individuacija odvija se tokom celog života i značajno utiče na svaku razvojnu fazu u životu čoveka. Mada je ovaj proces u odrasloj dobi određen prethodnim iskustvom, on nije kopija iskustva iz detinjstva. U ovom radu razmotraće se neki od razvojnih zadataka odraslog doba koji su uplivišani separaciono-individuacionim procesima: 1) prihvatanje telesnih promena; 2) prihvatanje ograničenosti vremena i sopstvene smrti; 3) partnerski odnosi; 4) promene u odnosima sa decom koja su odrasla i uspostavljanje odnosa sa novim članovima u porodici; 5) uspostavljanje i razvoj odnosa sa unucima; 6) briga o roditeljima i smrt roditelja; 7) korišćenje i prepuštanje, moći na radnom mestu i 8) održavanje starih i stvaranje novih prijateljstva.

Ključne reči: odraslo doba, separaciono-individuacioni procesi.